

Congress of the United States House of Representatives

November 7, 2023

Michael Whitaker
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20591

Dear Administrator Whitaker,

I write today to request an update on any actions taken to ensure the strongest possible staffing requirements for Air Traffic Controllers at the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport (AUS).

In Texas's 35th Congressional District, the City of Austin has experienced unacceptable safety issues due to insufficient staffing and support for our air traffic controllers. There have been five documented near-miss incidents reported in the last year alone. This is dangerous and unacceptable.

Recent reporting in both [The New York Times](#) and [The Washington Post](#) indicates that this is not unique to my district, noting that similar incidents have occurred multiple times a week nationwide. *The New York Times* identified nearly 50 near-miss incidents in July alone, and found [that nearly all U.S. air traffic control facilities are understaffed](#). While these near-misses continue to occur, air traffic controllers report strenuous working conditions, including forced overtime and shortened breaks. I trust you understand the risks that the current circumstances pose to federal employees, airlines, and passengers alike. When passengers get on an airplane in Austin, they deserve to know that they are safe and that air traffic control is properly staffed.

Earlier this year, at the direction of Acting Administrator Billy Nolen, the FAA's Air Traffic Organization and the National Air Traffic Controllers Association developed new staffing targets for fully certified controllers for each of the FAA's air traffic control facilities. Even after the report was verified and validated by MITRE Corporation, an independent third-party, Administrator Nolen did not adopt the Collaborative Resource Working Group (CRWG) target as the basis for the FAA's Controller Workforce Plan. The CRWG set a new target of 60 certified professional controllers (CPC) at AUS. FAA increased its target from a confusing range of 38-46 controllers in its [2022-2031 Air Traffic Controller Workforce Plan \(CWP\)](#) to a CPC target of 51 in its [2023-2032 Air Traffic Controller Workforce Plan](#). Yet, FAA only has 35 CPCs and fewer than ten trainees currently assigned to AUS. Even if all of the trainees were to certify tomorrow, AUS would remain understaffed under either the FAA's new standard or the CRWG's target, and that doesn't account for potential attrition from AUS.

Both Congress and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) must take action to address this chronic understaffing. The House-passed *Securing Growth and Robust Leadership in American Aviation Act* sets the hiring target for air traffic controllers to the maximum possible through 2028, and I will urge my colleagues to keep this provision of the bill in the final version. Yet my constituents and the aviation industry will not fully benefit from this increase in staffing without a robust workforce retention plan from the FAA.

Serving as a CPC is a notoriously demanding and intensive position, which requires a great deal of training and expertise. If the workforce sees a greater degree of attrition than expected, control towers become increasingly short-staffed, and both passengers and CPCs suffer. This is why I hope that under your leadership, the FAA will implement strategies to retain more CPCs, both in training and throughout their careers.

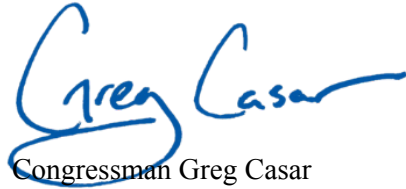
According to the FAA's 2023 Air Traffic Controller Workforce Plan, only 60% of those who began training between FY 2014 and FY 2017 successfully completed training at their first facility or a subsequent facility. Additionally, the FAA has nearly doubled its ten-year projections for CTCs lost both to academy attrition and from resignations, removals, and deaths since last year. While the 2022 Workforce Plan estimated 2,296 losses from academy attrition and 862 losses from resignations, removals, and deaths, the 2023 Workforce Plan estimated 4,898 losses from academy attrition and 1,498 resignations, removals, and deaths. In order to protect the safety of our constituents and the sustainability of the workforce, these statistics must be improved. Please respond to the following questions:

- What accounts for the drastic increase in the attrition projections? Do you anticipate the attrition projections to increase further in the coming workforce plan?
- What will the FAA do to improve the completion rate for trainees? How will the FAA better evaluate applicants and provide robust resources to assist current trainees in completing their certifications?
- Secretary Buttigieg has [stated](#) that due to the complexity of the training process, a government shutdown of even a few days could stop the FAA from reaching this year's hiring goals. In the event of a government shutdown, how will the FAA minimize the disruption to trainees?
- All CPCs must attend a single training academy located in Oklahoma City, OK. What is the feasibility of building a second facility or expanding the current facility's capacity to ease the training bottleneck? What resources would the FAA need to accomplish this?
- To increase the local workforce, the FAA has [allowed](#) air traffic controller applicants to the New York TRACON in Westbury, NY to apply to work specifically in Westbury, while all other applicants cannot guarantee where they will be placed when they complete their training. Given the danger to the public caused by similar understaffing in Austin, will the FAA guarantee Austin area applicants that they may work at the Austin airport?
- CPCs have [reported](#) being penalized for calling in sick due to fatigue, yet are more likely to make life-threatening mistakes if required to work while exhausted. What will you do to ensure that CPCs are not penalized if they feel the need to rest after working extensive hours?
- Will you commit to adopting the Collaborative Resources Workgroup's CPC staffing targets as the basis for the FAA's annual Controller Workforce Plan?

As air travel continues to increase, it is imperative that the FAA address these dangerous shortages. I look forward to your prompt response as I continue to monitor this situation closely.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Greg Casar". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Greg" and last name "Casar" clearly legible.

Congressman Greg Casar
Texas Congressional District 35